

VZCZCXYZ0002
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBH #1611/01 2962141
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 232141Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY NASSAU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3421
INFO RUEHBE/AMEMBASSY BELIZE 1307
RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN 5473
RUEHGE/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN 3574
RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON 8419
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 3431
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN 4589
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO 2705
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0312

UNCLAS NASSAU 001611

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CAR RCBUDDEN, CA/P DSTAEBEN, CA/PPT FMOSS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CPAS](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [BF](#)

SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER CHRISTIE CALLS FOR DELAY IN WHTI
IMPLEMENTATION

REF: NASSAU 305

1. (U) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Perry Christie called on Caribbean countries to form a united front in seeking to postpone implementation of the passport requirement until the land and sea requirement is implemented in 2009. Addressing the 29th Caribbean Tourism Conference in Freeport, Christie said delaying WHTI implementation would allow the rules to be applied uniformly and create a "level playing field." Christie suggested that the WHTI would severely impact "impulse" travelers who come to the region for a quick weekend getaway, and called for the U.S. to waive current expediting fees for passport applications. Christie's public call follows a direct appeal by Foreign Minister Mitchell to Ambassador Rood for flexibility in implementation. Bahamian hoteliers regard the newly announced delay in implementation of the sea travel documentation requirement as giving the cruise industry an unfair advantage that could have an impact on their business comparable to a major hurricane. End Summary.

2. (U) Following the recent announcement of changes to the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) that would delay implementation of documentation requirements for sea (cruise) travelers, Bahamian government leaders and tourism executives have been stepping up efforts to delay WHTI implementation dates. During previous consultations, (reftel) U.S. officials had provided general assurances that implementation dates for air and sea travelers would be the same, thus preventing any competitive disadvantage for Bahamian hoteliers. When recent legislation emerged from Congress delaying sea but not air implementation dates until June 2009, Bahamian interests began an aggressive campaign to challenge this threat to their livelihood. They have lobbied the Bahamian Government, which has now embraced the issue and is promoting a coordinated lobbying effort to delay WHTI air travel deadlines until June 2009.

3. (U) At the opening of the Caribbean Tourism Conference on October 22, Bahamian Prime Minister Perry Christie urged tourism officials from the 33 nations represented to forge a united front to fight WHTI. "Those of us who remain affected by WHTI must band together and mount a united effort to persuade the US Department of Homeland Security to extend us the same consideration given to the cruise lines" said Christie. He called for delay in implementation of WHTI for air travel until June 2009, and further called for a US

waiver of fees to expedite passport applications. Christie suggested that the sea implementation date had been extended because the cruise industry had been able to lobby more successfully than Caribbean countries.

¶4. (U) Prior to Christie's comments, the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) had been vocal in its opposition to the new timeline. On October 3, immediately following the announcement that new passport deadlines would be delayed until June 2009 for air passengers, the CTO -- led by Bahamian Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace -- likened WHTI to a "category six hurricane" for the Caribbean, calling the potential economic impact "catastrophic" with "nothing potentially more devastating." CTO also cited a recent study of the World Travel and Tourism Council that 30 percent of travelers to The Bahamas -- over one million travelers per year -- do not carry a passport. (Post's CBP pre-clearance staff estimate 15-20 percent without passports.) The study estimated 188,000 thousand jobs could be lost in the Caribbean, leading one local politician to call the initiative "an American layoff of Bahamian workers."

¶5. (U) Vanderpool-Wallace's concerns have been echoed by the local business community, including the influential Bahamas Hotel Association. In public appearances and private discussion with Post, Association representative Frank Comito challenged the fairness of the program's favorable treatment of cruise passengers -- visitors less valuable to the Bahamian economy than stopover visitors -- over hotel guests. Vanderpool-Wallace and Comito have both expressed their hope that an intensive regional lobbying effort could change the WHTI requirements. Ambassador Rood, the DCM and the Consular Chief are scheduled to meet with Hotel Association executives October 27, possibly with CA participation via DVC, to discuss the issues.

¶6. (SBU) Other Bahamian government officials have expressed similar views. Minister of Tourism Obie Wilchcombe called for the appointment of a lobbyist to better address legislative concerns in Washington on issues of importance to the region. Wilchcombe lamented the lack of parity in rules recently adopted. Minister of Foreign Affairs Fred Mitchell has privately raised concerns regarding WHTI with Ambassador Rood, most recently on October 23.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Prime Minister Christie's decision to weigh in publicly reflects the serious concern within The Bahamas about the impact the new WHTI implementation date for sea passengers could have on the Bahamian economy. He is under pressure both from the hotel industry and the opposition FNM, which has accused the government of neglecting the country's vital interests in the U.S. and instead attending NAM meetings and opening an Embassy in Cuba. Prior to the change in the sea implementation date, the government had reluctantly accepted the January 2007 date. As Christie noted, they now believe the playing field is no longer level between cruise and long-stay tourism, and can be expected to press hard for a change that would bring the implementation dates back in line. With tourism-related income accounting for over two-thirds of the Bahamian economy and Bahamian elections just around the corner, WHTI will remain a top priority for the Government. END COMMENT.

HARDT